

CREATIVE FREEDOM

and the

SOVIET ARTIST

Marietta
Shaginyan

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MARIETTA SHAGINYAN

Marietta Shaginyan was a known writer before the Revolution. In Soviet times she has had many books published and is a frequent contributor to the Soviet Press. She was awarded a Stalin Prize for her book *Journeys in Soviet Armenia*.

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Creative Freedom and the Soviet Artist

Marietta Shaginyan

In a conversation I had not long ago with an author from abroad the talk turned to creative freedom.

"What unfortunate people you are", he said, half in jest and half in earnest. "You cannot write about the things you would like to. You must write according to plan. And if you should happen to go against the will of the state you are publicly hauled over the coals. Look at Shostakovich. Didn't he have to recant after all that criticism? And the criticism is always so public. Can you deny that the creative artist in your country is bound hand and foot?"

I replied in the same tone, half in jest and half in earnest. "If you were right, it would follow that the creative professions in our country entail a very hard life indeed, a life harder than anybody else's. Now you'll admit that hard professions are rarely popular and that people usually avoid them. How, in that case, will you explain the strange fact that in all parts of our country not scores and not hundreds but thousands of people are eager to become professional writers, artists, composers?"

"Every day innumerable manuscripts are submitted to the editors of our newspapers and magazines, to our publishing houses. Innumerable people are writing and on countless topics: everyone wants to tell about his life, in poetry or prose.

"The most out-of-the-way parts of the country, the remotest villages, are producing composers, conductors, musicians. Small provincial towns arrange annual shows of works by their own artists and sculptors. Literary circles, art studios and orchestras are formed at factories and mills. How could art ever become so widespread in our country if the artist's life were as hard and unfree as you picture it?"

"Besides, you will find that in our country the thirst for creative effort goes far beyond the arts. Millions of people are eager to do creative work, each in his own line.

"What is the movement of innovators in our factories and at our construction sites if not an expression of this thirst for creation? Why, in the old days there was never anything of the kind.

"Or take our scientists and scholars. In the old days, the young man graduating from the university had to think about finding himself a position so as to earn the money to support his family. Very few remained at the university for creative research. Today nearly every young man and woman graduating from a higher school thinks about doing creative research.

"Recently I read in the newspapers about the chairman of a collective farm who presented a thesis on livestock farming for a scientific degree. Alongside his practical work of managing the farm, he carried on experiments in feeding and raising swine. These experiments were the basis of his thesis.

"The vast majority of our people are striving to introduce something new into their work, something that is their own, something creative. Could that ever be possible if the creative process were hampered in our country, if it were bound hand and foot, if one had to submit to orders?"

My companion gave a shrug, as if to say that what I had been saying might apply to ordinary mortals, but what he had in mind was the sensitive and complex nature of the professional artist. However that may be, we did not have an opportunity to finish our talk.

When I returned home I thought for a long time upon how little people abroad know about our life and about the psychology of our creative artists. And I decided to write a reply to that half-jesting author, a reply treating the subject deeply and seriously; the kind of reply I would have given to myself.

First, what does "creative freedom" mean?

Nowhere in the world, under no social system, does the artist want to create for himself and for himself alone. Nowhere would he shut himself up within the four walls of his room and not show his creations to anyone. Nowhere would he want not to publish the book he has written, not to display the canvas he has painted, not to turn over to an orchestra or a pianist the music he has composed.

Anyone who did want that would be an eccentric, and he could enjoy absolute "freedom". But ivory-tower eccentrics do not exist, and if they do they are rare exceptions who have nothing to do with the question.

And so, the creative artist—in any field and in any country—wants to bring his book, his painting, his symphony to an audience. In doing so, he inevitably comes into contact with a whole series of conditions which he must take into account in one degree or another.

In every particular social system, these conditions bear a definite character, which varies in each different social system.

So, in order to understand the creative freedom of our artists, one must first understand the conditions our social system creates for them.

To illustrate my point, I shall take my own case—that of a professional writer of long experience.

I am now sixty-five, and I lived the first thirty years of my life in old, tsarist Russia. I began to write for the newspapers at the age of fifteen, which is earlier than most writers. In tsarist Russia, therefore, I was a writer for fifteen years. Under the conditions created by the tsarist system I had published two volumes of verse, two volumes of short stories, several volumes of lectures and literary criticism and a number of textbooks.

What were the conditions I had to take into account in those years?

First and foremost, the size and specific features of the reading public. We writers did not have before us the great mass of the population of old Russia. The mass of the population did not buy books, nor could it. It did not go to the theatre, nor could it, if only for the reason that the vast number of district towns, let alone the villages, had no theatres in those days. It did not go to the picture galleries, for there were none, either in the district towns or in most of the regional administrative centres. It did not listen to concerts, for there were no concerts to listen to.

The masses of the people could satisfy their need for art only by their own means, folk means—by unwritten verses, tales and songs, and by playing folk instruments. The "art" the villages received from the town consisted of cheap and garish prints and calendars.

Among Russia's workers there were many people of intellect

who loved books. But the workers lived under hard conditions, they were poor, they could not afford to buy books; what they read they borrowed from libraries. Publishing houses which issued books for the progressive reader were very few in number, and they had only a fraction of the facilities and means that were at the disposal of the bourgeois publishing houses.

The bourgeois publishing houses could not, naturally, count on selling books to the mass of the people, to the millions. They counted on the small number who were in a position to buy books: the urban intelligentsia, wealthy landed proprietors, government officials, young students.

And so, the reading public in old Russia was a very small one, and our books were usually printed in editions of not more than 3,000 copies. The publishers, of course, preferred books that would have a good sale, so that they would not incur any losses, and they closely followed the tastes of the reading public.

My first efforts were published in the opening decade of the century. That was after the unsuccessful war with Japan and the revolution of 1905, when the tsarist government was greatly intensifying its reactionary policy.

One section of the reading public wanted to escape from the harsh realities and demanded light, frivolous, escapist literature. There was another section, however, which sought a literature giving a serious and truthful criticism of life. For books of the first kind publishers paid well; for books of the second kind the tsarist government persecuted, arrested and exiled their writers. It took high courage to follow the second path.

Everyone knows the life story of Maxim Gorky. At the height of his fame he was arrested, imprisoned and exiled from the capital by the tsarist government—and that happened more than once.

Remember the life story of Leo Tolstoy. While admirers of his genius were coming to visit him from all parts of the globe, while his novels were being translated into all the languages of the world, the Russian Church excommunicated him, priests anathematised him in the churches, teachers in the schools were forbidden to mention his name, and the censors banned such novels of his as *Resurrection*.

That was the fate of creative genius. Needless to say, when it came to artists of lesser talent the tsarist authorities stood on no ceremony whatsoever.

Such, then, were the conditions which the creative artist in Russia faced before the October Revolution. But there was still another important condition: public opinion. Russian classical literature had always dealt with big social problems—justice, human rights, defence of the oppressed. The intelligentsia of Russia, brought up on classical literature, was a strict judge of books and their writers. The progressive section of Russian society had exacting tastes. It scorned shallow, frivolous, banal writings. It scorned and pitied the writers of such “literature”, even though their books brought them large sums of money.

It was under those conditions, with an official censorship and an unofficial judge—the public—that I began to write. I was a minor journalist, supporting my family by my work. I had to adapt myself to the demands of the newspaper which gave me my daily bread. But I was an idealist. I was fired by the traditions of Russia’s great literature. I did not want to write banalities.

As a result I was eternally oppressed by the feeling of compromise, I was eternally compelled to pick a tortuous path between the Scylla of the tsarist censorship and the Charybdis of my professional conscience.

This laid the inevitable imprint of eclecticism and duality upon what I wrote. In my heart of hearts I was always dissatisfied with myself. I always felt hampered in my creative writing. I always felt that I was not giving it everything I was capable of.

Did I feel that I was a free creative artist? Never. But frequently, very frequently, I did feel degraded and belittled.

The October Revolution changed our social system, and along with it the conditions in which the writer works. If people abroad wish to gain a correct understanding of the Soviet writer’s creative freedom they must first clearly picture the new conditions in which he found himself.

Firstly and chiefly, a sharp change took place in the composition and size of the reading public.

After the Revolution we acquired a reading public of millions—millions who thirsted for books, who became the chief buyers of books. The life experience of these millions was very great, in many cases much broader, deeper and richer than that of the authors themselves.

To please this reading public, books had to be written simply, seriously and truthfully, and they had to deal not with petty things but with the main things, with what made up the sum and substance of the life of the masses.

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
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Otherwise people would have stopped reading our books. Our subjects had to come not out of thin air but from life. They had to be subjects vital and important to the people. One form of ownership, private ownership, was replaced in our country by another form, by socialist ownership.

Millions of people had to become accustomed to the feeling of being masters of all they surveyed. They had to learn to care for the vast fields and granaries of their collective farms, for the flowers and fruit of their public gardens, for the buildings in the towns, for the trains and the hotels, for the roads and the schools, to care for them with the same concern that one cares for one's personal property.

That cannot be learned all at once. And the Soviet writer, both a participant in and an observer of the new process taking place in our country, wrote books telling of his observations, describing people and characters who, despite involved conflicts, gradually, by no means easily, conquered their old psychology and learned to live and think in the new way.

All this took place in struggle, and our Soviet books always treat of struggle. They carry the reader along because they portray the acute, tense struggle between the old and the new, and always portray it in an optimistic and joyous tone, because in our life it is always the new that wins, although the victory does not come easily. The writing of such books interests and carries us, the writers, along too.

Some time ago a few of our literary critics and playwrights came out with a "no conflicts theory", asserting that since things in our country are going from good to better there are no grounds for conflicts. The entire Soviet public rose in arms against this theory which attempted to lead writers away from the truth. And conflicts, dramatic collisions, the clash between the old and the new, have retained their pivotal significance in the plots of Soviet books.

In general, I must say that whenever our professional literary critics go astray they are corrected by the voice of the public—as expressed in letters written by the readers to the newspapers, in opinions given at the readers' conferences arranged by the clubs and libraries and so on.

Before the Revolution, life was shackled, as it were; even outward changes were few and far between. One could revisit a town after an absence of five or six years and find everything

exactly the same as before. But after the Revolution everything began to develop at a tremendous pace, to change before one's very eyes ; and every aspect of our life, from the biggest to the smallest, abounds in fascinating situations of the greatest interest to the writer.

In the words of Goethe, "Und wo ihr greift da ist's interessant."

It is this that has awakened in a tremendous number of Soviet men and women who are not writers by profession such a passionate urge to write.

Not long ago, at a holiday resort, I became acquainted with a university professor of philosophy. During one of our talks he mentioned that until the age of twenty-two he had lived in a village and been a cowherd.

Picture it—from cowherd at twenty-two to professor of philosophy at forty-five. One often hears such stories. In fact, they are typical of Soviet life. And one can easily understand that people are proud of their life ; that they want to write about it, to share its vividness, its vigour, its wonderful progress, with others.

"But suppose," my foreign colleague might say, "a writer in your country wanted to produce a book defending private ownership against socialist ownership, a book whose hero is a champion of the old against the new. What then ?"

If a writer advocating a return to the old order did suddenly crop up in our country he would find no encouragement whatever. His ideas, running counter, as they do, to the country's general development and to the people's will, would meet with no support at all ; they would be condemned by the people ; nobody would want to read his book.

But if a Soviet writer depicted how a convinced "man of property" tries, in our socialist conditions, to amass money and become a capitalist, his book would be published and would give readers many an entertaining hour.

In the thirties two fine authors, Ilya Ilf and Evgeni Petrov, both of whom are now dead, together wrote a humorous novel of that kind, *The Little Golden Calf*. This book has gone through many editions in our country. It is a real adventure novel, a fascinating book in which one finds thrills, mystery, crime and what-not.

The Little Golden Calf tells the story of adventurers, men with the private businessman's psychology, who thirst for riches. They seek a hidden treasure, and they find it. But the minute

they have all the money they could possibly want, the tragedy begins. They can do nothing with it.

Under our system people cannot buy instruments of production, they cannot make a big percentage on capital, they cannot exploit the labour of others. A large sum of money in the hands of an individual cannot be turned into capital. It can be spent on food and drink and the like, but the larger the sum the harder it is to spend it on one's personal needs.

And so, the characters in this novel find themselves in the most comical situations. The reader laughs and laughs as he follows their adventures. And Ilf and Petrov laugh too. The authors convincingly debunk the power of money, even in the title of the novel. To have called it *The Golden Calf* would have been high-flown and would ring false; instead they made it *The Little Golden Calf*.

"But what is a writer to do", the author with whom I conversed might ask, "if he doesn't like Soviet topics, if he's a melancholy minded person who likes to ponder upon death, if the Soviet social system doesn't satisfy him, if he dreams of our capitalist way of life? After all, novels by Socialists attacking our system are published in our country. Why don't you allow your writers the same freedom? Why don't you allow novels attacking your system to be published?"

To that I could point out that there is a difference between the writer who fights against the old system, which is incapable of bringing happiness to the majority of the people, and the writer who fights against the new system, which does bring a happy life to the overwhelming majority of the population. The first writer will be called a progressive by his people, and the second a reactionary.

But since some might not find a reply of that kind convincing, I shall reply in a different way.

For more than a third of a century we have been living and writing in an absolutely new, socialist land. We have become accustomed to our way of life and we love it, as some people in the capitalist countries love their way of life.

Whole generations of our writers have been born since the Revolution and simply cannot conceive of any other way of life than ours. They are ardent supporters of their social system. We are so taken up with our full, steadily developing, acutely interesting and thrilling life that we simply

cannot imagine ourselves wanting any other life. In our country there are no writers, nor could there be, who would want to attack our social system, which would mean attacking the people.

One often reads in the foreign Press, assertions that our state puts "pressure" on authors, directing our creative efforts along certain lines, and that hence our art is not free. Yes, we do receive "instructions", but aren't they instructions of a kind that any artist, anywhere, would welcome?

What do they consist of? When our authors came to Joseph Stalin and asked him how to write, he said: Write the truth. What the leaders of our state want from us, and what the people want from us, is a truthful and bold portrayal of reality.

They want us to see life as it really is and to depict it in truthful and stirring artistic imagery. When a book or a painting or a work of music in our country is sharply criticised you will always find that the criticism is aimed against a distortion of the truth, against falseness, against a glossing-over of reality, or against slander. Artists are also criticised in our country if they retreat from realism to formalism.

Apropos of formalism, I should like the reader to have a clear idea of why a retreat from realistic form—that is, giving preference to a complicated, bizarre, grotesque, abstruse form instead of a realistic and simple form—is inadmissible in our art.

For pertinent examples one does not have to look far afield; they are offered by the history of the literature of any nation. Take France in the time of Molière, when a new and numerous body of spectators and readers—the young bourgeoisie, the Third Estate—appeared on the historical scene, though the theatre and poetry were still dominated by the dandified nobility, by *petits-mâîtres* who went in for the showy and the bombastic and the incomprehensible, for everything Molière so bitingely ridiculed in his "*précieuses ridicules*".

Is it not a fact that when Molière's plays were shown, the fops sitting in the front rows threw rotten eggs and potatoes at the stage? Is it not a fact that the playwright was accused of vulgarity and baseness, of violating lofty art? But the accusers have left not even their names to posterity, whereas the plays of Molière delight us to this day.

Take Italy in the time of Dante, when towns and the urban estate were awakening to historical life, while Latin, a language the people did not understand, still dominated in art, and poets wrote high-flown Mariolatrous verse, on biblical subjects far removed from life.

Dante dared to use the plain language of the people, the "vulgar" language. And is it not a fact that the celebrated writers of the time declared war on him for this? But where are those celebrated writers today? The Italian people speak, write and read the great language of Dante, and not the high-flown, alien Latin of the Mariolatrous verse, a Latin eaten away by mediævalism as wood is eaten away by the worm.

And now look historically at the Soviet Union in the first half of the present century. A tremendous human stratum—a hundred million people—appeared on the scene. These millions have become the masters of life, and they are creating their culture, their literature.

Can one speak to them in the affected and incomprehensible language of the late nineteenth century decadents? Would posterity remember the authors who today tried to cut capers in a language of that sort?

To answer that question with a "no", as we answer it, one does not have to be a communist or an agitator. All one needs is ordinary commonsense.

The number of our readers runs to nine digits. The number of our books is not so small either. In its March 1953 issue the magazine *Novy Mir* (New Life) carried a summary of the fiction and poetry publication figures over the years of the Soviet system.

I am not among the most widely published authors in our country. My indices, in comparison with others, are modest, average indices. And do you know what they are? In thirty-five years my books have been published in eighty-nine editions, in a total of 1,306,000 copies!

From that one can see how large a readership the Soviet writer has. And it is a readership absolutely new not only in size but in quality.

Our readers are busy people, people doing productive work. They are people with a new ethical code and a broad range of interests. Our reader has a wide experience of life, and one

of the first demands he makes of a book is that it be not below his own level of experience, his own aspirations, his own knowledge of life.

To satisfy this reader we strive constantly for purity and simplicity of language, for clear and expressive forms, for content that is meaningful and in step with the times.

Our musicians cannot force a hundred million ordinary healthy people to listen to a symphony built on dissonances that irritate and disquiet, that jangle the nerves, that threaten one with a sleepless night. Ours is an audience that does a healthy and normal day's work, and it wants normal recreation. It wants books that are understandable, music that is understandable and radiant, art that is clear, powerful, affirmative, that inspires one to creative effort.

If our writers and musicians produced hazy, delirious books and symphonies, the audience would simply stop reading such books and would not listen to such symphonies. That was what happened to Shostakovich's music when he let himself be carried away by fruitless formalistic quests, and the same happened to books that are not up to the mark. People stopped going to Shostakovich's concerts, and they stopped reading those books.

Our first critic and judge, you see, is the people. And the people's criticism is so rational, its criteria so wholesome, that the Soviet writer, artist and musician cannot but agree with it. For we, too, are a part of the people, and we think and feel in the same way as the people.

Another circumstance has to be kept in mind by anyone who wants to gain a correct idea of the status of the creative artist in our country.

Each social system lives according to its economic laws. Ever since the Revolution, the basic economic law of our social system has been shown in every measure adopted by our government, in every decree and law.

The essence of this law is that the aim of production is the maximum satisfaction of the constantly growing material and cultural requirements of our society. That is the purpose of our production and constructive effort. That, too, is the purpose for which we write books.

Such is the law of our life. It is a law we have assimilated imperceptibly and which has become as necessary for us as air. Who will say that a person is not free because he must breathe? The same applies to the fulfilment of a social function which has

become as simple and necessary to us as breathing. Does that take away our liberty? We write for the living contemporaries of our advanced era. That is our calling, in that we are fulfilling our will, our talent and our intelligence.

Authors abroad usually cannot understand how we bear what they call the "hauling over the coals" when something in a writer's work is found to be erroneous and is criticised.

Still less do they understand a writer (or other creative artist) publicly admitting his mistakes after having been sharply and publicly criticised. How many ridiculous attempts to explain this have been made by enemies of our system—and also by objective persons trying to understand our system!

They have spoken of self-hypnotism, of fear, of the herd instinct, and what you will! Yet the answer is very simple, and at the same time very profound, rooted as it is in the innermost recesses of the human conscience.

An author has written a novel. He thinks it is a good novel. He is in love with his creation. And then, suddenly—sharp criticism.

At first he feels bitterly hurt. Then he begins to analyse it. What happened? What happened is this: he betrayed himself, betrayed his talent, by creating a work which did not measure up to the criteria of the masses, did not fulfil its social function. It distorted reality, or it misinterpreted facts. In brief, it fell short of the mark, and in the form in which the writer published it, it ran counter to the requirements of our society.

Picture for a moment the writer's feelings. He is shaken, he suffers. And before him lie two ways out.

He can isolate himself from the people, become a Robinson Crusoe, and say that he was right and the whole people wrong—in which case he will have no road for progress. If he remains alone, wrapped up in his petty egoism, he is doomed to an eternal mulling over his injured feelings, to an eternal dark night of setting himself against the voice of his people, the voice of his comrades—and against the voice of his own conscience.

The point is that our people's exacting and high criticism has taught us to have great faith in our powers and always to expect from ourselves the most and the best we are capable of. And when the public, collective mind criticised us—a mind that never makes mistakes—we have become so accustomed

to look deep into ourselves that in our heart of hearts we cannot but feel the justness and correctness of the criticism, no matter how painful it might be.

The writer who drowns within himself the voice of the people and the voice of his conscience is doomed to a pitiful life. That is the coward's way out.

The other way out is to listen to the voice of one's own conscience and to admit, fearlessly and courageously, that yes, you did not succeed in giving all you could, that you swerved from the goal you set yourself and produced a poor, false book, and hence a book harmful to society.

And the minute you admit that, that is, the minute you judge yourself by the criteria of social reason and your own conscience, you sense relief, because you feel a great force. For to admit a mistake means to prove stronger than it, means to outgrow it, means to have a creative reserve that will enable you to re-do the book and to produce a better one. That is why it so often happens that in response to criticism our writers admit their mistakes, and afterwards come out with new, good, powerful books.

There is, incidentally, another feature of our creative work connected with the exacting demands of both the people and ourselves. I have often been surprised at the quantity certain highly gifted authors in the capitalist countries write, and by how uneven their books are.

Alongside with vivid, sparkling novels they publish dull, colourless, mediocre books that seem to have come from a different pen. Let us take an example from literature that is widespread and has been translated into many European languages, say, the English writer, Agatha Christie.

She writes good detective stories, some that are masterpieces of the genre. I read with tremendous satisfaction, for instance, her clever, subtle and highly-scientific detective story set in ancient Egypt, *Death Comes at the End*. And at the same time she has produced, or rather "slapped together", a series of hasty, careless books—*M or N*, *ABC Murders* and the like—meant to be read in a railway carriage and then thrown away. The reason for this probably is that the readers demand more and more new books from the authors they like and do not stop to think whether the authors can turn them out like a machine.

In our country the conditions for creative writing are different.

Our authors strive to give the people the best they are capable of, and the reader, too, demands more than entertainment from a book. This explains the fact that instead of constantly putting out new books (to the detriment of their quality) our authors like to rework their books, to republish them taking into account the readers' critical remarks. That is an original feature of our creative conditions.

Alexander Fadeyev, a prominent Soviet author, wrote a fine novel about the Patriotic War, *The Young Guard*, but the novel had weak points and gave an incorrect treatment of the work done by one of its characters, drawn from a person in real life. Critics pointed out these shortcomings to the author, and he spent the next few years reworking the novel and eliminating the shortcomings.

Valentin Katayev, a talented and clever author, wrote a huge novel about life in Odessa during the fascist occupation. And again, among the brilliant pages were some that were pale and incorrect. The author spent two years reworking the novel and then published it again.

In 1948 I wrote practically a new version of *Hydro-central*, a novel I had written in 1930 and which had gone through dozens of editions in the intervening years.

We write fewer new books, perhaps, than our western colleagues, but on the other hand put in more work, and more attentive work, on what we have already written and published. It grows, together with our times, with our life, with our experience. We want our books to live for new generations of Soviet readers. Life in our country is advancing at seven-league strides. There are Soviet writers who have written only two or three books, but these books, constantly renewed, move forward together with the advancing people.

Do Soviet writers have creative freedom? This I know: only since the Revolution, only in the Soviet land, only through guiding ourselves by the people and feeling our connection with the people, have we become genuinely free as creative artists. I have come to understand the writer's lofty purpose and to work towards it with that full freedom of choice, with that reliable support from the people, with that feeling of deep satisfaction in bringing benefit, which give every creative artist, every working person, the right to a clear conscience and to the respect of his people.

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